

Previous post

Iron man elected new Max Planck president

NATURE NEWS BLOG

Cutbacks kick off kerfuffle over Spanish-German observatory

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Spain's National Research Council (CSIC) and Germany's Max Planck Society agreed late last month to major budget cuts at the Hispano-German Astronomical Observatory at Calar Alto, Spain.

The new contract cuts the observatory's 2014-2018 budget from 2010 forecasts (PDF, in Spanish) of more than €3.2 million per year to €1.6 million per year (PDF, in Spanish and English). Then the Max Planck Society, which has contributed nearly two-thirds of the observatory's budget since 1979 in return for 50% of the facility's observing time, will leave the joint venture. The decision to drop out is not new; it was part of a 2010 agreement and is part of a shift toward new observatories with different capabilities.

The observatory will start cutting staff this month, and beginning in 2014 it will operate only one of its three instruments, its 3.5-metre telescope. Its remaining 2.2-metre and 1.23-metre telescopes will be available to research teams with the funds to operate them.

"All the medium-size observatories are going through such exercises," says astronomer Hans-Walter Rix, director of the Max Planck Institute for Astronomy in Heidelberg, the German operating partner of the observatory. In their prime, 2- to 4-metre telescopes such as those at Palomar in California, La Silla in Chile and Kitt Peak in Arizona drew many researchers, but a proliferation of larger telescopes in locations with better observing conditions has changed astronomers' priorities.

Now top astronomy teams fight for a few nights a year at 8- and 10-metre terrestrial telescopes or even orbiting telescopes. That has freed older medium-size telescopes for longer observing runs.

Calar Alto will fit its 3.5-metre telescope with a new spectrograph and embark on a time-intensive survey for Earth-like planets that would have been difficult or impossible when the telescope was shared by many projects. A European astronomy network, ASTRONET, called the observatory "globally unique" thanks in part to its suite of instruments (PDF, in English).

The cuts have sparked complaints in the Spanish astronomy community. The Institute of Astrophysics of Andalusia, the Spanish operating partner, accused CSIC, which is its parent body, of neglecting scientific criteria in its decision (in Spanish). The Spanish Astronomy Society also notes that despite government

promises to consult a scientific panel the CSIC told Spanish astronomers of the budget cut in late May, ahead of a national astronomy commission meeting (in Spanish).

A CSIC spokesperson told *Nature* that the CSIC held several public meetings where community members and other institutions offered their opinions, but no funding. The observatory's new director will seek new financial partners to give the observatory continuity after the German departure, the spokesperson says.

Rix says, "there is a bright future for such telescopes" but acknowledges that the Calar Alto budget cuts will mean "probably there will be some less redundancy, reliability, less observing comfort for the users."

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